

What Joyce Learnt From Her Mother

Item 8



number two 1985

Barbara Tizard
University of London

Nowadays it is widely assumed that professionals have a good deal to teach parents about how to educate and bring up children. Nursery school, for example, is seen, not just as a secure and enjoyable environment for children, but as a place where their language and intellectual development will be fostered by professional attention. This is especially claimed in the case of working class children, whose parents are believed not to develop their language adequately.

But in a new study of four year old girls at home and at school my colleagues and I became increasingly sceptical of these claims. Our tape recordings and observations showed that the homes provided a very powerful learning environment. Simply by being around their parents, talking, arguing, and endlessly asking questions, children have opportunities to learn about a wide range of topics, in contexts of great meaning. This was as true, we found, for working class children as for middle class children (though there were social class differences in style and approach). Because parents and children have a shared life, stretching back into the past and forward into the future, parents can help the children to make sense of their present experiences by relating them to the past. Children's own intellectual efforts, and their persistent curiosity, are an essential part of this learning process.

In contrast, the intentionally "educational" initiatives of the teachers often seemed not only flat, but unfruitful and ineffective. Consider the following conversation between Joyce, a working class girl who is nearly four, and her nursery school teacher. Joyce was rolling out clay when her teacher sat down by her:

TEACHER: What's that going to be, Joyce?

CHILD: (No reply.)

TEACHER: How are you making it?

CHILD: Rolling it.

TEACHER: You're rolling it are you? Isn't that lovely? Oh, what's happening to it when you roll it?

CHILD: Getting bigger.

TEACHER: Getting bigger. Is it getting fatter?

CHILD: Yeah.

TEACHER: Is it, or is it getting longer?

CHILD: Longer.

TEACHER: Longer. Are my hands bigger than your hands?

CHILD: My hands are little.

TEACHER: Your hands are little, yes.

CHILD: It's getting bigger. Getting long. And long. Look!

TEACHER: Mmmm. What's happened to it, Joyce?

CHILD: Got bigger.

TEACHER: It has. My word.

This conversation contains several features which crop up over and over again in teacher-child conversations at nursery school. Consider, first, the context in which the conversation takes place. Why are the teacher and child talking at all? Clearly it is not because Joyce has anything she wants to say to the teacher at this particular moment. Rather, the conversation is taking place because the teacher sees a chance to introduce certain educational ideas (in this case, to do with size and shape) into the child's play.

The method Joyce's teacher uses to carry out this educational aim is to ask her a series of "testing" questions. Apart from the first question – "What's that going to be?" – they are all questions to which the teacher already knows the answer. Joyce does not respond with enthusiasm to this approach. She fails to answer the first question and when she does respond her replies are fairly minimal. Apart from a brief moment when Joyce wants her teacher to see what is happening to the clay (and says "Look!") the conversation is very much a one-sided affair.

What is the justification for this kind of questioning?

It is suggested that the teacher benefits through learning what the child is capable of, what she knows and what she doesn't know. On this view, the questioning is primarily a type of assessment. The other justification is that the child is stimulated by such questions to think about aspects of the situation which had not previously occurred to her. Through answering the teacher's questions she will begin to develop her own cognitive linguistic skills. On this view, then, such questioning can constitute a means of learning.

On the strength of this particular conversation, it is hard to justify either of these claims. Take, for a start, the idea that the teacher is getting an accurate assessment of Joyce's capabilities. The problem here is that most of Joyce's replies are so ambiguous, one can't say whether her understanding is deficient.

For example, she says the clay is "getting bigger" as she rolls it out. This might mean that Joyce really thinks there is

more clay as a result of her rolling – as Piaget claims that children who fail his conversation tasks, actually believe. On the other hand, she may simply be using the word "bigger" in a loose manner to describe the increased length of the clay.

Joyce's teacher picks up this ambiguity and asks if the clay is getting fatter, but again it is hard to interpret Joyce's reply. Does she really think the clay is increasing in width as she rolls it out, or does she simply assume that the teacher is using the term "fatter" to refer to length?

The teacher then introduces a somewhat bizarre note into the conversation by asking Joyce, "Are my hands bigger than yours?" Presumably, she's trying to check on Joyce's understanding of "bigger," but the child's reply is not very informative. True, she says her hands are "little," but it is not clear if she really understood that her teacher's hands are "bigger."

Developmental psychologists are well aware of the difficulty of establishing what children understand by words like "bigger" or "more," and the teacher's failure to make a successful assessment is not surprising.

The other argument for questioning young children in this manner is that it will help to promote their cognitive or linguistic development. Is there any evidence that Joyce's development has been promoted here?

Again it is hard to be sure, partly because we lack criteria of how to judge what Joyce might have learnt, and partly because we do not know what Joyce's teacher was trying to teach her. The teacher might have been trying to point out that clay gets longer and thinner as it is rolled out. If so, then it is not clear why she did not say so directly. Moreover, she had no reason to think that Joyce did not know this.

But maybe the teacher was trying to establish that the word "bigger" is inappropriate here, and to encourage the child to use the term "longer." If so, then she seems to have partly succeeded, for the child does spontaneously say the clay has got "long." This mastery is short-lived, however, for the child then goes back to where she started: the clay has got "bigger."

On the face of it, it would seem that neither teacher nor child has learnt much from this conversation. Yet there is more than one kind of learning. What Joyce may well have learnt is experience in the kind of conversation she is expected to have with a teacher. For the teacher, this conversation may simply have confirmed what she and her col-

leagues told us before the recordings were made: namely, that Joyce was a girl whose language was "poor," Joyce's apparent confusion with size words, together with her general uncommunicativeness and minimal replies, are all likely to perpetuate the picture which the teacher had already formed.

Compare the feel of Joyce's conversations at home. Here, she is having a sandwich for her lunch, while her mother makes a cup of tea and then starts to prepare the evening meal:

CHILD: Mum, it was good to have something to eat while you was at the seaside, wasn't it? (Mother cuts sandwich.)

MOTHER: Was good, I agree.

CHILD: Well, some people don't have something to eat at the seaside.

MOTHER: What do they do then? Go without?

CHILD: Mm.

MOTHER: I think you'd have to have something to eat.

CHILD: Yeah, otherwise you'd be (unclear) won't you?

MOTHER: Mmmm. When we go to David's school we'll have to take something to eat. We go on the coach that time. (Joyce and her mother are going on an outing with an older child's school.)

CHILD: Mmm. To the seaside?

MOTHER: Mmm. Probably go for a little stroll to the seaside.

CHILD: Mmm? Yes, I still hungry.

MOTHER: When?

CHILD: When we was at the seaside, wasn't I?

MOTHER: We weren't. We had sandwiches, we had apples.

CHILD: But we, but when we was there we were still hungry wasn't we?

MOTHER: No, you had breakfast didn't you?

CHILD: But, we were thirsty when we got there.

MOTHER: Yes, suppose so, yeah we were.

CHILD: What happened? We wasn't thirsty or hungry.

MOTHER: Why weren't we? What happened?

CHILD: Well, all that thirsty went away.

MOTHER: Did it?

CHILD: Mmmm.

This conversation illustrates both the real limitations of Joyce's ability to express herself, and the way in which she struggles to express complex ideas despite these limitations.

In this she has varying degrees of success. In the first part of the conversation she is able to bring out and contrast two separate but related facts: that it was good to have something to eat at the seaside; and that other people didn't have something to eat. These two statements can even be seen as the premises of a logical argument, with the implication being: So what do other people do?

We will never know if Joyce would have made this step by herself, for her mother makes it for her. Later on in the conversation, however, Joyce is less successful in conveying her meaning, despite her mother's attempts to help her. All the same, one can only admire Joyce's persistence as she struggles to express herself, culminating in the delightful creation: "All that thirsty went away."

We do not know what prompted this conversation; it is possible that eating a sandwich in the kitchen reminded Joyce of eating sandwiches at the seaside. However the puzzlement arose, the situation allowed her to express it. Joyce and her mother were together in the kitchen, both engaged in their different activities with time and space for Joyce's musings to be expressed and allowed to develop.

Her mother plays an important role in the conversation. By her support and responsiveness, she helps Joyce express her meaning, and follow through some of the implications of what she is saying. The mother's role is not just a responsive one. She tells Joyce about a planned trip to the seaside with her brother's school. The point about this new information is the way it is linked to what has gone before. The mother and child link a past event with a future one, enabling the shared world of experience to act as a backcloth to their conversations. The creation and referral to a shared world is a typical feature of many conversations between mother and child. We believe it is of fundamental importance.

At school Joyce's conversational ability had appeared to be much more limited. This was a general tendency amongst the girls in our study. They often appeared subdued with the staff, speaking more briefly than to their mothers, less often answering questions or contributing spontaneous remarks, and much less often asking questions. On average, they asked their mothers 26 questions an hour; but their teachers, only two. Of those questions that were asked at school, a smaller proportion were curiosity and why questions than at home. What we called "passages of intellectual search" – i.e., conversations in which the child puzzled over something she did not understand – were entirely absent.

Working class girls like Joyce were particularly affected by the school setting. They less often used language for complex purposes when talking to their teachers than to their mothers, and very rarely asked them "Why?" questions. Instead of using the staff as an intellectual resource, as Joyce used her mother, they tended to turn to them for help with aprons, and assistance in quarrels with other children.

The net effect was to make them appear lacking in confidence and immature, compared with the middle class girls. Perhaps in response, the teachers themselves used a less mature speech style when talking to the working class girls.

They made less frequent use of language for complex purposes when addressing the working class girls than the middle class girls. They were more likely to initiate conversations with working class girls by questioning them; their questions were pitched at a lower level; and they gave them a more restricted range of information. They were less likely to ask them for descriptions and more likely to ask them intellectually easy questions concerned with labelling objects and naming their attributes – like "What's that called?" or "What colour is it?"

Asking for colour names was, in fact a particularly frequent staff conversational gambit with the working class girls. It was certainly the case that a number of these girls were unsure of colour names. Given that the staff saw "naming colours" as an important educational aim, this approach could be justified. In a wider context, however, doubts arise. By focussing on this intellectually simple task, they failed to provide the children with opportunities for more advanced conversation. The low-level conversations that ensued must have reinforced their own belief that the children were only capable of simple dialogue.

A tendency to adjust one's conversational level to the perceived level of the partner's speech is an almost universal tendency of both adults and children when talking to younger partners, and probably assists language development. In the situation we are describing, however, the effect can only be to reinforce the children's use of more immature language. In fact, far from the nursery school providing a compensatory language environment for the working class girls, both the quantity and quality of the language addressed to them at home was superior.

On the very threshold of the children's school careers, the teachers were responding to the apparent, rather than the real, abilities of the working class children, tending to underestimate what they could achieve, and presenting them with inappropriately low-level tasks.

© 1984, New Society

The copyright for this article is held by New Society Ltd, 5 Sherwood Street, London W1V 7RA, Great Britain.

This *set* item was originally published in *New Society*, 13 September 1984, and is here reprinted by permission of the publishers and the author.

Barbara Tizard is Professor of Education at the University of London Institute of Education and Director of the Thomas Coram Research Unit.

This article is based on *Young Children Learning* by Barbara Tizard and Martin Hughes, published in 1984 by Fontana, at £2.95. The work was carried out with Helen Carmichael and Gill Pinkerton.